

Testimony of
Faith Sweeney
Before the Education Committee
HB 6763 An Act Concerning an Audit of the State-Wide Mastery Examination
March 1, 2023

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and distinguished members of the Education Committee, my name is Faith Sweeney, and I am a National Education Association Teaching Fellow and K-5 Literacy Coach.

I support House Bill 6763, an Act Concerning an Audit of the State-Wide Mastery Examination.

As a K-5 Literacy Coach and educator for 27 years, I see how tests have consumed most of a classroom teacher's planning and instructional time. It is essential to audit how much testing, preparation, and impact on curriculum state mandated tests and schedules have imposed on the education system.

I will give a snapshot of what testing looks like for Kindergarten and Third Grade. I can only speak to the literacy assessments but there are math assessments that equal the time spent to administer and prepare for them.

In Kindergarten, students enter school, and after taking time to get to know students and build routines and expectations, the screening and testing begin. Teachers test for letter identification, letter sounds, phonemic awareness (several tests within this category), and if a student shows beginning reading skills, reading. Then, there is the state-mandated universal screener, which tests all of the same skills.

This testing is done at least three times a year, with progress monitoring in between. Tests like this can take a classroom teacher up to two weeks to administer because it is 1-1. The universal screeners that are computerized take at least two days. If the classroom teachers have a paraprofessional, a literacy coach, and an interventionist to support the administration of the tests and universal screener, there might be a reduction in time depending on the availability of the support staff.

Whole class instruction, small group instruction, and authentic teaching and learning stop. Students lose the opportunity to apply any instruction during the testing time and receive 1-1 support or small group support from their classroom teacher. This description does not include the progress monitoring or unit pre and post-assessments that take place throughout the year.

In Third Grade, students enter school similarly to what was described for Kindergarten students. In contrast, third-grade teachers administer a benchmark reading assessment at least three times a year.

The most significant impact is teaching to the SBA. In some cases, teachers are asked to infuse SBA questions into their units. This is not authentic teaching and learning. To prepare for the SBA, some schools have a 3-week unit to prepare for testing. Then there are two weeks of SBA test administration.

I understand that we need to monitor student growth in reading and math but at what expense? When testing becomes the goal of student achievement, we are not preparing students for life or encouraging them to be lifelong learners. Most CEOs and hiring departments of companies are looking for “soft skills,” not achievement test scores. They want students to be curious, personable, passionate, resourceful and dedicated to success, not good test takers.

Tests are only one point of information that informs a teacher, principal, or district how a student is doing in school. Teachers are holding students accountable for their learning. Teachers are using that information to inform their instruction. State mastery tests are not at the heart of what drives instruction and shouldn't be. What drives instruction is what teachers see their students doing daily, along with standards, a scope and sequence of skills, and curriculum. Tests should not drive student learning because it waters down instruction and perpetuates a false narrative of achievement.

I support conducting an audit and finding the right balance of accountability and a teaching and learning environment where all students thrive.